

# Knowledge of Individual Differences of the Learners of Second Language Enriches Second Language Teaching

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## Abstract

The field of individual learner differences in teaching and learning a second language is a special area of which there are many controversies and differences of opinions among the SLA teachers and experts around the world. But there is no denying the fact that the differences that exist among different learners of a second language have significant impact on their performances. So, the knowledge and awareness of the existence of these differences among learners help teachers a lot when they perform as teachers. This paper investigates into how the teachers' knowledge of the learners' individual differences enriches second language teaching and finds out that this is an assistive tool in enriching SLA teaching.

**Keywords:** individual difference, second language, teaching

## Introduction

Personal factors and individual differences are very much concerned with genetic and environmental causes. Human beings are bio-social organisms. Education aims at enabling each student to attain an all-round progress in compliance with his or her attributes. They should be provided with appropriate assistance and support to achieve this. Their needs are to be paid rapt attention so that the students can develop their potential to the full. As every person has individuality, every learner of a second language has some individual characteristics or ways through which he/she approaches his/her learning or acquisition of the target language. These traits vary from learner to learner and these are called individual learner differences (Ellis, 2005). These differences affect the learning or acquisition of learners of a second language tremendously and they are reflected in their learning styles, learning strategies and affective variables (Skehan, 1989). Today's classrooms are filled with cultural and linguistic diversity. And more importantly, students differ from one another in their cognitive abilities, background knowledge and learning preferences as well. Implementation of differentiated instruction in an effort to effectively address all students' learning needs asks for sound knowledge of individual difference of the second language learners. However, there are some differences of opinions about the effects of individual differences of the learners. Fillmore (1979) opines that sometimes individual differences are treated as very important whereas, sometimes the same are considered insignificant on second language acquisition.

## Classification of individual differences

Identifying the individual differences and classifying them are a complex task because the differences or the characteristics are abstract phenomena. The main difficulty is that it is not feasible to identify, observe, assess and identify directly such qualities as aptitude, motivation, or anxiety. That is why, different terms have been used by different experts to present these phenomena. Hawkey (1982) has shown some of these: 'affective, cognitive and ability factors' (Tucker et al. 1976). 'Affective and ability factors' (Chastain 1975) and attitudinal or motivational characteristics (Gardner et al. 1988). Ellis (1985) classifies the individual differences into two broad categories: (i) Personal factors and (ii) social factors.

### 1. Personal factors

Theories about how different factors could lead to success in the second language learning process have been a core part of studies into second language acquisition for decades. Individual differences among learners, such as personality variation, have long been seen as the cause of different learning abilities; Ellis (1985) states that personal factors are personalized i.e. every individual learner has his/her distinct way of approaching second

language learning. As personal factor, like attitude, are very much subjective they are identified and assessed by examining the learners' diaries, and by the use of questionnaires and interviews. Schumann and Schumann (1977) say that such factors influence the second language learners very distinctly. Though there are limitations of these methods of identifying the personal individual factors, both the diary studies and questionnaires or interviews provide insights into the personal nature of language learning, particularly learning from classroom instructions. Personal factors have social, cognitive, and affective aspects.

Social aspects are concerned with the relationship between the learners and the native speakers of the second language. These aspects are external to the learners. These also relate to the relationship between the learners and other speakers of their own language. Next, cognitive aspects are concerned with the problem solving strategies used by the learners of the second language, while affective aspects concern the emotional responses aroused by the efforts to learn the second language. Personal factors are grouped together under three titles:

- i. group dynamics
- ii. attitude to teacher and course materials
- iii. individual learner techniques

### **1.1 Group dynamics:**

Group dynamics concerns the scientific analysis of the behavior of small groups. It refers to the understanding of the behaviour of people in groups, such as study groups, task groups, that are trying to solve a problem or make a decision. It is a relatively young discipline with its root in the 1940s but with its actual development taking off in the 1950s and 1960s. An individual with expertise, such as a trainer or teacher, can assist a group in accomplishing its objective by diagnosing how well the group is functioning as a problem-solving or decision-making entity and intervening to alter the group's operating behaviour. Group dynamics has been proved to be highly relevant in language education because the success or failure of learning in a class situation is based few issues like the relationship among students as well as teachers, overall atmosphere of the classroom, roles played by both teachers and students, and more importantly students' level of competence in co-operating and communicating with each other. Group Dynamics seems to be important in the classroom of SLA. Bailey (1983) records in some details the anxiety and competitiveness experienced by a number of diarists. Some classroom learners make overt comparisons of themselves with other learners. In other kind of comparisons, learners match how they think they are progressing against their expectation. McDonough (1978) also pinpoints GD as an important set of personal variables. He notes, however, that although rivalries can promote confusion, they can also serve a stimulus for learning. So, the teachers' knowledge about the group dynamics helps them teach better.

### **1.2 Attitude to teachers and course materials:**

Students have very different views about the kind of teachers they think is best for them. Some prefer a teacher who creates for them to pursue their own learning path. In contrast, others prefer a teacher who structures the learning tasks much more tightly. Pickett (1978) study of successful language learning reveals greater diversity in attitudes towards the role of the teacher. Some learners wanted the teacher to act as 'informant', but others praised teachers who were logical, clear, and systematic. The main generalization to emerge from Pickett's study is that learners need to feel sympathy for their teacher, and also want him or her to be predictable.

Moreover, learners have varying attitudes to teaching materials, in general. Adult learner does not like having a course book impose upon them in a rigid way. They prefer a variety of materials and the opportunity to sue them in ways they choose for themselves.

### **1.3 Individual Learning Techniques:**

There are various techniques employed by different learners. Naiman (1978) and Pickett (1978) identify numerous study techniques, such as:

#### **1.3.1 Preparing and memorizing vocabulary lists:**

A number of learners seem to have highly personalized or special ways of coping with this. For instance, one of Pickett's (1978) subjects kept a notebook in which he recorded first the English word, then the foreign word in phonetic transcription, and finally the orthographic version of the foreign word. He reported having three vocabulary lists, which he kept going at the same time: one was arranged chronologically, the second alphabetically, and the third either grammatically or situationally.

#### **1.3.2 Learning words in context:**

Some learners make no attempt to lists. They rely on picking out key vocabulary items from the contexts in which they are similar.

#### **1.3.3 Practicing vocabulary:**

There are various techniques that the learners use in practicing vocabulary. Such as, they deliberately put words

into different structures in order to drill themselves. Some read to reinforce vocabulary, some play games such as trying to think of words with same ending, and some repeat words to themselves.

Other techniques that the learners use are related to the ways in which the learners get into contact with the target language. For this purpose they often look for situations in which they can communicate with native speakers of L2 or, they want to listen to radios, watch TV or cinema for maximizing their exposure to the target language. If a teacher knows the learners' techniques, he or she will find it easy to guide his/her students properly in the acquisition of the target language.

## **2. General factors**

All learners have general factors which are social, cognitive, and affective in nature. It is the responsibility of the teacher to assess the extent to which these factors are present or the manner they are realized. According to Rod Ellis (1985) general factors are of two types: modifiable (which may get modified during second language acquisition e.g. motivation) and un-modifiable (which cannot be changed during the acquisition of L2 e.g. aptitude). General factors of individual differences comprise the following factors: (i) age (ii) aptitude (iii) intelligence (iv) cognitive style (v) motivation (vi) attitude and (vii) personality.

### **2.1 Age:**

It is a common belief that children are better learners than adults. According to Lenneberg's (1967) critical period hypothesis after lateralization, a process by which the two sides of the brain develop specialized functions, the brain loses plasticity. According to him lateralization of the language function is normally completed at puberty, making post-adolescent language acquisition difficult. But later researchers have failed to support this hypothesis in full. They have found that even those who begin learning a language late in life are capable of gaining high level of proficiency. The only aspect of language shown to follow the critical period hypothesis is the acquisition of accent. The majority of those learners who begin learning a language after puberty are unable to acquire a native-like accent. However, the effects of age in second language acquisition are explained considering three factors: (i) route of acquisition (ii) rate of acquisition and (iii) success of acquisition.

#### **2.1.1 Route of acquisition:**

Different studies have shown that age does not change the route of second language acquisition. Fathman's (1975) studies carried on two hundred students aged from 6 to 16 indicate that age does not a different order to development in transitional structures such as negative and interrogatives.

#### **2.1.2 Rate of acquisition:**

Some studies pertaining to the rate of acquisition suggest that older students are better learners. Aged learners usually reach higher levels of proficiency even when both they and young learners are exposed to second language for the same amount of time.

However, Snow and Hoefnagle-Hohle (1978) have shown that learners who progress most rapidly may be adolescent. They also found that age was a factor only when it came to morphology and syntax. There were only very small differences on pronunciation tests.

#### **2.1.3 Success of acquisition:**

Various studies show that the longer the exposure to second language, the more native the learners become. Burnstall (1975) says that older learners are more efficient and with the passage of time, the influence of the age of the learner begins to outweigh the length of learning period. Some other researches on the same issue say that as far as in pronunciation is concerned, younger learners do better. In short it can be said that, firstly, starting time does not affect the route of second language acquisition. Secondly, starting age affects the rate of acquisition. Thirdly, both number of years of exposure and starting age affect the level of success.

##### **2.1.3.1 Cognitive explanation of the effect of age on SLA:**

Adults and adolescents differ from young children in their ability to comprehend language as a formal system. Older learners can learn about language by consciously studying linguistic rules. They can also use these rules when they use the language. In contrast, younger children, while not totally lacking in meta-awareness, are not so prone to respond to language as form. For them, language is a tool for expressing meaning. However, according to Rosansky (1975), the awareness that comes with age inhibits natural learning. As children lack this awareness, they can learn language with much ease. However, Rosansky's argument is based on the false assumption that post-puberty learners are less efficient and less successful than younger learners. So, researchers have found that cognitive development is the factor that helps adult learners learn more rapidly.

##### **2.1.3.2 Affective explanation of the effect of age:**

In SLA the difference in the affective states of young and old learners account for age differences. Brown (1980) suggests that SLA is related to stages of acculturation identifying four stages: (i) initial excitement and euphoria (ii) culture shock leading to feelings of estrangement and hostility towards the target culture (iii) culture stress involving a gradual and vacillating recovery and (iv) assimilation or adaptation to the new culture.

The notion that young children pick up second language more easily than older learners is clearly

challenged by evidence of areas in which the later do better. It is safe to state that the view that there is no critical age in terms of acquiring the syntax of a second language but the same is not true in pronunciation.

Now, the question that needs to be asked is this not whether older or younger learners do better, but rather what goals are suitable at various ages and what conditions lead to greater success in learning specific part of a second language at various ages.

So, if a teacher of second language is aware of the effects of age in the learners, he/she can handle the students' problems, improvements and success effectively. Without this knowledge a teacher might treat the students wrongly, and his/her teaching may be faulty.

## **2.2 Aptitude**

Aptitude is one of the abilities that are required for learning a second language. Thus, a learner with high aptitude may learn faster and more successfully. There are official aptitude tests, for example, the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) or the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB). In these tests, the subject has to do exercise to find out, for instance, the ability to memorize words. In general, they test the auditory ability, grammar sensitivity, inductive language learning ability and memory. For example, the MLAT tests recognition, analogy, and understanding of syntactic structures. Language aptitude researches are often criticized for being irrelevant to the problems of language learners, who must attempt or learn a language regardless of whether they are gifted for the task or not.

## **2.3 Intelligence**

Intelligence is the underlying ability to learn rather than the actual knowledge. As McDonough (1981) says that the term intelligence refers to capacity rather than contents of the mind. Some studies show that intelligence may be more strongly related in some particular kinds of second language abilities than others. Intelligence is highly related to performances on reading and dictation and writing tasks but not on listening comprehension and free oral production tasks. Teachers in this regard should use the intelligence of the learners as far as possible.

## **2.4 Cognitive styles**

These styles concern the ways learners prefer to acquire and represent language. Such styles contrast with aptitude in that aptitude is seen as more of an invariant attribute. Whereas, styles imply scope for being moulded malleability. There is also the possibility that different styles may contrast with one another, but each style may have its own advantages. The major style difference which has influenced the language learning field is the field independent vs. field dependent contrast. The former style implies people who are analytic, breaking down (learning) problems into component parts. Field dependents are holistic in comparison. Such people are also supposed to be more person-oriented and warm. Research suggests that only the field of independent style correlates moderately with language learning success. But the area is one of promise, rather than realized achievement.

## **2.5 Motivation**

Motivation is the guiding force behind a person why he/she does something or behaves in a particular way. Robert Gardner (1979) distinguishes between two motivational orientations, integrative and instrumental. The former concerns learners who want to learn a language to enter the community of its speakers, while the latter regards language as a potential tool which may simply be useful. Brown (1981) identifies three types of motivation: (a) Global motivation which consists of general orientation to the goal of learning a L2, (b) Situational motivation, which varies according to the situation in which learning takes place, (c) Task motivation, which is the motivation for performing particular learning tasks.

Some other kinds of motivation can be identified which are: i) Instrumental motivation, learners may make efforts to learn an L2 for some functional reasons: to examination, to get a better job, to get a place at university etc. (ii) Integrative motivation, some learners may choose to learn a particular L2 because they are interested in the people and culture represented by the target language group. (iii) Resultative motivation, an assumption of the research referred to above is that motivation is the cause of L2 achievement. However, it is also possible that motivation is a result of learning. That is, learners who experience success in learning may become more, or in some context, less motivated to learn. This helps to explain the conflicting research result. (iv) Intrinsic motivation, involves the arousal and maintenance of curiosity and can increase and decrease as a result of such factors as learners' particular interests and the extent to which they feel personally involved to learning activities. These four types of motivation should be seen as complementary rather than distinct and oppositional.

## **2.6 Attitude**

Attitude is the way that one thinks and feels about somebody or something. Attitude differs from person to

person or from learner to learner. This is an important factor for learners of a second language. Second language learners' attitudes have been classified by Stern (1983) into three types: (i) attitudes towards the community and people who speak the L2 (i.e. group specific attitudes), (ii) attitudes towards the language concerned, (iii) attitudes towards languages and language learning in general.

These attitudes are influenced by the kind of personality of the learners, for instance whether he is ethnocentric or authoritarian. They may be also influenced by the social milieu in which leaning takes place. Different attitudes, for instance, may be found in monolingual and bilingual contexts as experienced in L2 classrooms.

## 2.7 Personality

Personality is the sum total of various factors that combine to make a person different from other people. Personality of a second language learner is a major factor that influences his/her second language acquisition. There are a number of personality traits which either facilitate or inhibit second language acquisition. These include: self-esteem (Hye, 1979), extroversion (Busch, 1982), reaction to anxiety (Bailey, 1983), risk taking (Ely, 1986), sensitivity to rejection (Naiman, 1978), empathy, inhibition and tolerance of ambiguity. These features of an individual learner play vital role in his/her acquisition of a second language. Therefore, second language teachers need to be aware of these traits in order to be able to assess the learners' success or failure.

## Conclusion

In view of the foregoing discussion it is evident that individual learner differences are very much influential in the acquisition of a second language for every learner. That is why teachers need to know about these factors. If the ESL teachers are well trained and they know about the learners' individual differences, they will be able to teach the second language in a way that is acceptable to the students. In this way, the teachers' knowledge of individual differences enriches second language teaching.

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